



# DISTORTED:

REFLECTIONS ON EARLY SYDNEY PUNK

above photo: Urban Guerillas, by Darian Turner  
opposite page, top right: The Grand Hotel, Sydney  
opposite page, bottom: Last Words,  
by Darian Turner

*Distorted: Reflections on Early Sydney Punk is a documentary film that focuses on the scene that grew around Sydney, Australia's Grand Hotel, a venue started by some younger punks after the closure of Radio Birdman's legendary Funhouse in 1977. Yes, by the end of that year Oz already had a second wave of punks, and this film is about those folks' experience building a scene of their own. If you feel like the retrospective punk documentary as a genre has become stale and repetitive, I direct your attention to Distorted by first-time documentarian Des Devlin. It's a refreshingly honest, positive, fair-handed and down-to-earth film—no Rollins, no famous bands, no one saying how cool it was before hardcore ruined punk, etc. And for record geeks and fans of early Oz punk there are definitely some nerd moments, like the story of the misspelling of "you're" on the Rocks' "You'r So Boring" and the deadly live footage of the Last Words. MRR sat down to discuss the filmmaking process with director Des Devlin. Introduction and interview by Paul Curran. Photos courtesy of the filmmaker.*

**MRR: What was your motivation to make this film, and how long did it take to finish?**

Basically, I thought it was a story that ought to be told, or at least attempted, but no one had or was about to. Not much was known about that scene—I guess because no "name bands" came out of it. Part of the motivation was also the material. I'd known for years that there was material around, and tried to keep track of it. For better or worse, that scene had a huge influence on my life and I wanted to explore that and in a way compare my memory of it to other peoples'.

The film took around ten years to make, if you include preliminary research and collecting materials. In 2003 I started a degree in ethics. My thesis was an attempt to see how punk ethics sat with traditional ethical theory. For example, straightedge might be seen as falling within a broader historical ethic of abstinence found in the temperance movement,

or renunciation found in asceticism. During that time I slowly started to collect and digitize materials. I then took the idea of a film to another university as a proposal for a doctoral thesis. I met with Hart Cohen at the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at the University of Western Sydney and he agreed to supervise the project. That was when I knew the film would actually get done. (The film is the visual part of the thesis, which also includes a written dissertation.) So, in the same way I had looked at punk within ethical theory, with the film I was looking at punk subculture through a kind of prism of visual anthropology—though you wouldn't necessarily see that by watching the film because it was mostly about research methods and process, and the way the film was put together.

**MRR: Was it hard to find everyone you wanted to interview? Were there some people you couldn't find or people that didn't want to be in the film?**

There were some people I thought I needed to interview because they'd been instrumental in the Grand Hotel scene and its history. For example, Greg and Pete from the Scabs had a lot of knowledge on establishing the Grand as a punk venue. Mostly though, interviewees were not selected in the usual way that documentary filmmakers might go about selecting "talent." It was almost a first come, first served approach. I didn't have a lot of time to spend on production because I also had to think about editing and post-production, all of which I did on my own on a Hackintosh I built. On top of that, I wanted to make sure people felt that their words were not taken out of context or that they were not misrepresented. So I organized for everyone to preview the work and to make sure there were no major objections. That way, if I had to, I could make necessary changes before showing it in public. I think this is just basic respect for the people you're working with, especially when you haven't seen most of them in 30 years and you're asking them to trust you with their stories. The duty of care you

have to people becomes very tangible, and you don't want to piss people off or cause them grief. Not because they're going to find you and kick your teeth in, but it's just a basic respect thing. Amongst all that I had to write my dissertation, which I ended up completely rewriting after the film was completed.

There were a few people I knew, or knew of, who I wasn't able to find. It was mostly a case of starting from scratch. I had no idea where I'd find people or what country they'd be living in, or even if they were still alive. I was told Bob Short had died in London sometime in the 1980s, so it was great to find him alive and well and living in Sydney. There were a couple of people who agreed to an interview and then backed out, which I think is fair enough. The history of documentary filmmaking is rife with exploitation for the sake of "getting the story." Or, in the case of research more broadly, manufacturing the findings by being selective with your data.

**MRR: One very noticeable thing is that there is no mention of the most famous early Australian punk bands: the Saints and Radio Birdman. Even X is only briefly represented in the film. Was this on purpose, or did these bands have relatively little influence on the Sydney scene?**

I wanted to focus fairly strictly on the Grand Hotel scene. The Saints were from Brisbane, though they did move to Sydney for a while before heading off to the UK. As for Radio Birdman, the Grand as a venue was pretty much modeled on the self-managed aspect of their venue, the Funhouse. But at the Grand there was a sense of having moved on from them. It was a much younger crew, a lot of school-age kids. John Healy was thirteen years old when he was playing in his first band, Schizophrenia.



Same with Darian Turner when she started photographing the scene. Also the Grand scene was made up of kids from everywhere—the country, the outer suburbs, as well as the city. By contrast, the Birdman scene came across, at least to young ratbags like myself, as sophisticated and kind of impenetrable.

The other thing to say about Birdman is that so much of what is written about them is caught up in how early they were. There's that whole index that people fixate on—who came first, who was before whom and so on—and to me that is really boring. Even though *Distorted* for the most part moves along chronologically, I hope it conveys the idea that, for many people, punk is a personal experience that doesn't have to be tied down to a certain period.

X was a different matter. They didn't regularly play the Grand but they were loved by everyone. To this day they are my favorite live rock'n'roll band of all time. But the reason

they don't feature more in *Distorted* is because during filming I met someone who said they were making a film on X. So I thought they were going to be well documented at some point. And ultimately the film isn't about "punk rock" but punk subculture and memory.

**MRR: What are the Central Station area and Darling Harbor (which I gathered was very nearby) like today? Is the Grand Hotel still there?**

The Grand Hotel building was demolished in the mid 1980s to make way for a multi-million-dollar hotel complex. To my mind, that is a real shame because the Grand was established in the mid 19th century and had an incredible history. One of its owners had been the subject of Sydney's biggest fraud case in the late 1800s. When he died he left his fortune to his two (for want of a better word) illegitimate children and their mothers. His lawyer and a few other establishment people thought they were too lowly and undeserving of such a massive sum of money and so forged his will to their financial benefit. But they were busted and a couple of them sent to prison. It was a huge scandal. The area around the site is also historically fascinating if you're into that sort of thing. I guess for us Australians we are always looking for ways to unravel the lies perpetrated from the time of colonization, because our real history has been actively and systematically perverted for over 200 years. Sydney is a city hell bent on demolition of the past in all its aspects.

**MRR: You gathered an impressive amount of great photos and film footage. Was it part of your original plan to focus on the scene photographers and filmmakers, or did you realize while making the documentary that these folks deserved some special attention?**

I was incredibly fortunate that people like Astrid Spielman and Toby Zoates were generous with their material and let me digitize it. The chapter "Imagemakers" was a bit of an homage to the





people who had the presence of mind back then to record what was going on around them. A lot of material was gone or badly degraded but a lot of it was fairly intact too, which I think is kind of miraculous considering people had lugged it round with them for 30 years or more.

**MRR: There are some punks in the film who were (and still are) very politically minded and some that think politics has no part in punk, but as a viewer I came out feeling like they all had valid viewpoints. Was this clever editing or just the way it worked out naturally?**

One participant, Rob Crasti, remarked that Sydney punk politics ran the whole gamut, and that was pretty much supported in the interviews. But I thought, rather than have someone just say that, it would be better to show it through the diversity of positions. I suppose it is further testament to the idea that punk is at the same time both instantly recognizable and impossible to define. But yes, it was important to present a spectrum of viewpoints and let viewers decide where to take that.

**MRR: There's no mention of fanzines at all. Wasn't anybody doing them at the time?**

Sydney had a small number of really vibrant zines. I contacted the publisher of what was probably the best known one at the time, but he declined to be interviewed. You could say it was a bit of an oversight but at the same time I didn't have any interviewees to work with, and the film was interview-based. In hindsight I guess a kind of montage segment of zine graphics might have been possible but then, every single second of the film had to be cleared for use—not only the video interviews but also all of the archival materials, so in the end it came down to logistics.

**MRR: What part did you have in the early Sydney scene? Did you have a band, zine, or anything like that?**

I was part of the Grand scene. I'm there in the

crowd in some of the footage and images, but no, I wasn't doing a zine and didn't really play in a band until 1979. My brother Andy was a founding member of the Last Words. We were living at my parents' house 50 kilometers outside of Sydney when punk came along. So I have him to blame, and probably another brother, Terry, who had an incredible bootleg and import record collection. There was a music mag in Australia called *RAM* and I remember seeing a full-page ad for the Ramones in it and thinking, "What's this Ram Ones? Did the magazine put together a band?" Later I would sit in a wardrobe with my '70s headphones

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photo: Urban Guerillas, by Arthur Georgeson

and listen to that album and it was a deeply powerful and ecstatic experience for me at the time, hugely liberating. Blondie toured in '77 and Andy took me along to that and a few other things. Then he moved out and it wasn't until I left school and moved into the city that I got to go to punk gigs and meet punks my own age. I also remember Andy asking me if I thought the Stranglers were punk or hippie because, well, there was a punk on bass but there was also a guy who looked like Denis Hopper from *Easy Rider* and he played keyboards.

**MRR: Why did you decide to give *Distorted* away for free online rather than charge money for it?**

I didn't want money to get in the way of the story. I wanted it to be as free as possible from commerce. I was lucky in that I was able to do it out of a university. I approached it as research, not as filmmaking in the usual sense where you have a crew and a budget and you have to think about funding and distribution deals etc. I didn't have time for any of that. It also fits with the period, and bands like the Thought Criminals making their music from then free for download. They had a great song called "I

Won't Pay (For Punk Records)," which is pretty much the same sentiment as Crass's line about the Clash—"not for revolution, just for cash," which I don't think is 100% accurate but it's definitely valid. I'm aware of the arguments about artists' rights to their intellectual copyright, but I thought in this case it would be better to just give it away.

**MRR: Did the film have an opening event or any big screenings? Festivals?**

Two of the participants, John Clements and Bob Short, helped me organize a premiere screening. I had approached them with the idea of doing readings, because they are both writers. But they convinced me that the screening should be a full-scale gig. And they were right, it was standing room only. A whole load of Grand Hotel bands got together and played.

The Urban Guerillas played for the first time in 30 years. The film was then shown at a few small festivals, including the Too Drunk To Watch Punkfilmfest in Berlin, which is organized by a couple of really great people, Corny Schulz and Christiane Meißner. It runs over four days in May and I would recommend anyone with a punk film to show to track them down.

**You can watch *Distorted: Reflections on Early Sydney Punk* for free at: [distorteddocumentary.weebly.com](http://distorteddocumentary.weebly.com)**